

Chapter V - Deactivation and Assessment

When the Susquehanna District was set up, Division Engineer Groves admonished SED leaders that their objective was to get in and get out of the disaster area as fast as possible.¹ Such a goal required that phase-down operations be a concern from the beginning. The Baltimore district engineer, himself the head of a permanent organization, was impressed by the fact that people in SED "from the very top had the primary drive to dissolve their organization, and they worked to get rid of their job."²

Detailed plans for consolidating existing area offices were reviewed at an area engineers' meeting less than two weeks after the district's establishment. Consolidation was geared to respond to an anticipated decline in mission activity in various parts of the district. Accordingly, on 6 August York Area Office became a resident office under Harrisburg as did the Lewistown Area Office on 13 August. That same day the Lock Haven Area Office became a resident office under Sunbury. Initially scheduled to join Sunbury on 20 August, the Towanda Area Office was retained until 31 October after receipt of an unexpected assignment — the resurvey of stream clearance damage reports. Thus, by the end of August Susquehanna District's nine original area offices were already reduced to six.

Another round of consolidation began in October in the final weeks of SED's operations. On 15 October the Reading Area Office, which lay within the normal civil works boundaries of the Philadelphia District, was transferred back

to that district. Sunbury's Lock Haven Resident Office was abolished on 22 October. The Sunbury Area Office, itself a consolidation of offices, got resident status under Harrisburg on the 29th and was abolished altogether on 5 November. Elmira Area Office responsibilities, together with those of Towanda, went to the Baltimore District on 31 October, and Harrisburg rejoined Baltimore on 15 November. All Wilkes-Barre Area Office functions except mini-repair and contract finalization — tasks to be completed by the 21st — were also transferred to Baltimore on 15 November.

Consolidation of the Susquehanna District's area offices involved the transfer of all active contracts and some local-hire personnel. Contracting effectiveness benefited noticeably as a result. Whether the move was within SED or to another district, the process occurred smoothly. Every effort to plan and coordinate these changes was made by representatives of the Susquehanna, Baltimore and Philadelphia Districts, the North Atlantic Division, the Chief's Office and OEP.

Inactivation of Susquehanna District headquarters, which paralleled developments within OEP's organization, engaged the attention of Colonel McElhenny and his staff throughout much of November. Contracts were finalized, plans were made for turning in district equipment and supplies, a district after action report was prepared, and files were screened for transfer to appropriate districts.

Flag-lowering ceremonies marking the dis-

solution of the Susquehanna District began at the Shiremanstown headquarters at 1100 hours on 30 November 1972. Snow and a chill wind that day signalled the arrival of winter, whose effects the disaster mission had in great part been trying to forestall. The 76th Engineer Battalion supplied the honor guard. General Andrew P. Rollins, the deputy chief of engineers, General Groves and Colonel McElhenny spoke briefly. A reception and luncheon in the U.S. Steel Building followed.

Susquehanna District paid tribute to those individuals who had made outstanding contributions to its mission. To military officers went the Army Commendation Medal or a letter of recognition and to civilians, a letter or certificate signed by the Chief of Engineers or special service awards in cash amounts up to \$1000. Mary Wilson received the highest civilian award from General Groves in Philadelphia a few days after the flag-lowering ceremonies.

Corps of Engineers involvement in the Susquehanna River disaster area did not end with the dissolution of the Susquehanna District: flood protection work under Public Law 84-99 continued as did contract management and project application support. Long-term studies for future flood protection and flood plain management were launched. But the short existence of SED — just over four months — seems a remarkable instance of administrative efficiency on the part of a branch of the federal government. The speed with which contracts were awarded and payments made during the summer and fall of 1972 were key elements in the Susquehanna District's successful performance. Moreover, as stressed above, the district was singularly oriented toward getting its job done and toward disengagement. Every effort had been made to phase out district units as soon as possible.

Susquehanna District was a truly cooperative effort by all parts of the Corps. Personnel from districts and divisions were bound together in a common cause; lasting friendships were made, and a spirit was generated that infused the whole organization. Many Corps disaster personnel gained a sense of purpose and accomplishment from the work they did. The results

were tangible; people in desperate circumstances were being helped. Quite striking aspects of the role of the Corps of Engineers and its Susquehanna District were the quickness and efficiency of their response. These qualities were in no small part due to the unique combination of military and civilian personnel throughout the Corps and to an equally noteworthy decentralization of authority. That military officers were accountable to their superiors for their performance provided a measure of discipline lacking in many civilian controlled agencies. Decentralization at all levels meant decisions could be made without seeking higher approval. In particular the captains utilized by SED commented repeatedly on the importance of having contracting officer and other decision-making authority. Their having such authority indicated the confidence placed in them by their superiors.

The district liaison officer was in one of the best positions to notice how Corps methods compared with other agencies and he stated:

One thing I was proud of was our lines of command and responsibility have always been decentralized down as low as we can get them. I never made a decision that was not backed up by Colonel McElhenny and the people in the district. So I sort of ... assumed that responsibility. Colonel McElhenny said ... go do the job and that was ... the guidance, so I did it and it was backed up. It's not true in the other agencies. Many times a representative ... if he is not the senior official does not have the authority to make a decision, and he has to go back and run it all through his people and that delays it.³

Following tradition, the Corps made self-evaluation a central part of the Susquehanna District deactivation. The process began as early as 30 August when NAD requested interim after action reports from its districts. Later, members of the Agnes recovery team at all

levels prepared after action reports detailing their activities and making recommendations for future operations. Most felt the disaster effort provided experience in the workings of the Corps that would likely never be duplicated and that local communities had benefited from their efforts, but nearly everyone had suggestions for improving upon the Agnes response.

Probably the most frequently cited problem was the turbulence resulting from the use of temporary duty personnel on assignments that rarely extended for the life of the district. As noted earlier, no agreement was reached on how best to cope with the problem. Men who had served in the field tended to favor longer temporary assignments. The district after action report suggested that a cadre of individuals constituting a "redi-district" for such emergencies as Agnes was the best solution. Under such an arrangement personnel would generally be expected to remain with the temporary district for the entire period of its existence. Another benefit would be rapid mobilization: the individuals comprising the redi-district would be identified in advance.

While such solutions had merit, many Corps officials remained unconvinced. Division Engineer Groves did not feel that personnel turbulence was really a significant problem in the Agnes operation. Moreover, he opposed the idea of blanket requests for extended temporary duty assignments because it could result in less qualified individuals. Few districts or divisions would be inclined to send their best for a lengthy commitment. "I would rather have a rapid turnover and have the right people," Groves concluded.⁴ Colonel Richard J. Hesse of NAD further suggested that personnel turbulence was perceived differently from various vantage points in the Corps. Of course, personnel changes were upsetting to Susquehanna District leaders and to the area engineers in particular, but the division engineer and the Chief of Engineers viewed the problem in terms of the overall requirements and needs of the Corps of Engineers.⁵

As far as the North Atlantic Division was concerned, in future disaster recovery personnel would be drawn from a pool of experienced individuals but no effort would be made to

assign positions in advance. How could you be sure, General Groves asked, that your designated people would be available when you needed them?⁶

Officers from the advanced course at Fort Belvoir especially registered specific complaints about insufficient guidance from OEP and insufficient briefings by the Corps. Inadequate training in disaster recovery was another frequently cited problem. In most cases, these were difficulties exacerbated by the extreme conditions surrounding Tropical Storm Agnes. Yet they were circumstances which the Corps and other federal agencies ought in great degree to be able to remedy. North Atlantic Division has subsequently conducted its flood emergency exercises with the idea of applying some of the lessons learned in Agnes to benefit both Corps personnel and local communities. The U.S. Congress passed a new disaster relief act in May 1974 after hearings on the effectiveness of the 1970 act during which experiences following Agnes were considered in depth.

Forming a distinct administrative entity to deal with Agnes recovery under the Disaster Relief Act of 1970 was perhaps an extreme response on the part of the Corps, but it seems to have been entirely the right move in view of the situation following Agnes. Clearly, existing districts could not have handled the challenge as efficiently. So many districts and divisions had civil works authority in the region affected by the storm that there could not have been effective coordination either internally or externally, and the Baltimore District was simply overburdened. Because the federal government intended to rely so heavily on the contracting capabilities of the Engineers, an organization that could be fully effective was essential.

Utilization of a special unit in the wake of Agnes, however, did not mean the Corps had found a mechanism suitable for all its future disaster missions. Most Corps officials agreed the establishment of SED was a wise, even brilliant move, but no one suggested blanket use of the technique in the future. General Groves did think a temporary district should be used again in cases where the Corps had to get a large number of contracts underway in a short

period of time.⁷ Colonel Hesse, while thinking that the creation of the Susquehanna District was a good decision, argued: "I don't think for a minute that it should necessarily set a precedent for doing this kind of thing again. If there is any way you can do it effectively, in your existing structure, that is more desirable."⁸ Both Groves and Hesse reached these conclusions on the basis of significant experience with other disasters as well as with Agnes.

No federal, state or local agency could have expected to escape criticism in the climate following Agnes. Rushing to overcome suffering and the change of seasons, utilizing borrowed and often inexperienced personnel, relying on contractors from near and far coordinating with a multitude of other organizations all providing assistance, and continually dealing with individuals stunned by what happened to them presented tremendous challenges to all involved in the disaster relief. Victims of the storm's devastation expected much from their governments and cared little how they got the help. Any delay — there was too much but there had

to be some — generated frustration. It was in this climate that the role of the Corps of Engineers — one of the most visible agencies involved — was sometimes misunderstood, and this misunderstanding was probably the single most important cause of criticism leveled at the Corps. On the other hand, unfavorable comments on Corps damage estimates were quite valid. Though guidance was unclear, inexperience and excessive estimates on the part of some Corps inspectors were crucial factors.

What the Agnes experience demonstrated was that each disaster has a character all its own, that no single response is possible, and that the federal agencies fighting the disaster must have flexibility. Otherwise the interests of the victims and the needs of state and local governments are not best served. And meeting these needs is, after all, the goal of federal disaster assistance. Susquehanna District was a timely administrative experiment. The remarkable come-back of Susquehanna River valley communities is in great part testimony to the district's success.